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BY

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,
VICAR OF GLASBURY.

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SERMON VII.

THE UNBELIEF OF THE SAMARITAN LORD.

2 KINGS VII. 2.—“Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.”

WHEN these words were first uttered, there was a famine in Samaria. It was occasioned by the besieging army of the Syrians. With Benhadad at their head, they closely surrounded the city, and by cutting off its supplies, reduced it to a condition of almost unexampled suffering. For some time no prospect of deliverance appeared; all was hunger and despair. At length, in the very height of the distress, the prophet Elisha stands before the king, and declares aloud in the name of the Lord, that on the morrow provisions should be abundant and cheap in the gate of Samaria. Then followed the scene described in this verse; “A lord on whose hand the king leaned, answered the man of God, and said, Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.”

Now, on the first view, there appears nothing very remarkable either in the speech of this lord, or in the reply of the prophet; but the consequences which followed, give them a very solemn interest. And not only so; as though the Holy Spirit were determined to force them on our notice, they are repeated at the close of this chapter, and with a particularity which leaves us no room to doubt of their importance. The man is evidently held up by God himself as a warning to us. Let us then seriously examine his history. This is very short. Three points will comprehend all that we know of it—the nature of his sin, its causes, and its punishment.

I. *His sin* was unbelief; not the unbelief of any threatening, but the unbelief of a promise.

We see then, that we have before us a sin of very common occurrence; one that is committed every day, and committed, not by the infidel and scorner only, but by persons who manifest some regard for the gospel, and some reverence for God. Unbelief of the divine promises is as common here as it was in Samaria; as common perhaps in this church, as in the palace of Jehoram.

Take, first, the case of *the young*. You are seeking happiness, looking eagerly around you for something that will quiet and satisfy a restless heart. God speaks to you from heaven. He says, “My ways are ways of pleasantness, and all my paths are peace.” He makes known to you the gospel of his Son, tells you of the unsearchable riches of his grace, and says, “Here is blessedness; here is rest.” Now do you believe him? The greater part of you

must answer "No;" for how do you act? At the very time when he is telling you that there is happiness in religion, and offering to you that religion which will make you happy, you turn your backs on him, and say to every trifler who comes in your way, "Who will show us any good?"

And look at *the anxious and care-worn*. You have families to provide for; children to support, and watch over, and guide. You are careful and troubled about them. The Lord speaks to you also. He says, "Take no thought for the morrow. Thy bread shall be given thee, and thy water shall be sure. Leave thy children to me. Every hair of their head is numbered." "We believe this," you say. Why then, brethren, this load of care? Why so many restless nights and feverish days? Why such dark anticipations of future evils, and so much sinking of the heart at the prospect of the days to come? Could you at times be more fearful, if there were not a God in the heavens, or a Bible in the land?

The complaining too are equally guilty in this thing. God tells you in the scriptures that he directs all your affairs, and directs them in infinite wisdom and love—so wisely and so graciously, that not a single event could be altered without doing you mischief. "All things," he says, "work together for good to them that love me." But let the hour of trial come; let losses and disappointments befall you; let sickness lay waste your body, and enfeeble your mind; let your children die, and your friends desert and the world wrong you;—what is your language? "All these things are against me."

Turn also to *the convinced sinner*. Your eyes have been opened. The Holy Spirit has shown you your guilt and danger. You feel that whatever others may be, you are sinful, perishing, and undone. Now while in this state, Christ addresses you. He assures you that "his blood cleanseth from all sin," that "whosoever believeth in him shall not perish." Indeed what is the whole Bible, but one grand exhibition of mercy for such as you? What is the redemption it proclaims? A redemption purchased for the lost. What is the grace it displays? A remedy for their ills. What is the heaven it unfolds? A world prepared for their enjoyment.

Whence then arise these doubts of the Redeemer's mercy? Whence come all your long cherished suspicions of the extent and freeness of his grace? Why is one of you saying, "There is no mercy for me?" and another, "I can never be pardoned: I am lost?" These fears spring not from humility, but from unbelief; from a proud reasoning which contradicts God's word, and gives the lie to the Holy One of Israel.

The same spirit of unbelief is at work in many other cases. Such of you as are afflicted, and say that of your afflictions there will never be an end; such as are tempted, and despair of finding any way of escape; such as have painful duties to fulfil, and tell us that they are too weak ever to perform them; they who are struggling with their corruptions, and are hopeless of a victory over them;—all these disbelieve the promises of heaven; they are all guilty of the sin of this Samaritan lord. They may not be guilty of it to the

same extent as this man was, but their sin is precisely of the same character. It is unbelief, and find it where we may, it is an offence against the Majesty of heaven.

II. But whence does all this unbelief proceed? *Its causes* are many.

1. This is one of the most common—*we see not how the promise can be fulfilled.*

“Whence,” asked this scoffing lord, “is this promised abundance to come? Will the stones of our wretched city produce it? Will the Syrians throw it over our walls? If we have it at all, it must fall from the clouds.” He could not see the least prospect of succour; he consequently treated the prediction of Elisha as false, as nothing better than a mockery of their sufferings.

And thus do our own foolish hearts often beguile us. We are reminded of some gracious promise. It exactly meets our case; it offers us the very mercy that we need. Why then do we not believe and embrace it? “It cannot, we say, be accomplished. No help can reach us. Every way of deliverance is closed. We must be left to suffer and mourn”—and why? Because the Lord does not send down an angel from heaven to show us the path in which succour is coming; because our feeble eyes cannot pierce the clouds which conceal a descending God.

2. Others find a different reason for their despair. It springs from the extremity of their case. “Our condition,” they say, “is desperate. It is, in its own nature, incapable of relief. Nothing can help or comfort us.” In this instance, we disbelieve the promise of Jehovah because *we lose sight of the greatness of his power.*

No state could be more wretched than that of Samaria at this time; none could appear more hopeless. So extreme was the distress, that, in the preceding chapter, we find two mothers actually agreeing to slay their infants for their mutual support. Their enemies too were as near the city as ever, and as numerous and strong. How was it possible then, that one short day could bring to this famished people cheapness and abundance? The thing seemed impossible. So this nobleman thought it. Nay, he speaks as though he doubted whether God himself could bring it to pass. “Behold,” he asks, “if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be?”

And the Israelites in the wilderness often reasoned in precisely this manner. The pillar of fire was throwing its miraculous light around them; the streams from the smitten rock were flowing at their feet; the manna was in their hands; and yet poor faithless Israel, in the midst of all these prodigies, was continually distrusting the omnipotence of Jehovah. “They believed not in God,” says the psalmist, “and trusted not in his salvation. “They spake against God.” “They limited the Holy One of Israel.” “They said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?” “Can he give bread also? Can he provide flesh for his people?”

Do we wonder at this folly? It is nothing more than a picture of our own. Lift up your eyes on high. Is any thing too hard for the Lord who fixed that sun in the heavens, and taught the stars to roll? "No," we answer; "in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength." And yet what are we daily hearing? "My guilt," says one, "never can be blotted out; it is so great." "My heart no grace can cleanse," says another; "it is so desperately wicked." "My soul can never again see comfort," says a third; "it is so sinking, so forlorn, so completely wretched." And then comes a fourth, telling us that there is no room for him in heaven, and still urging the same plea for his unbelief—his case is so desperate; he has wandered so very near to hell.

And where is all this said? In a world where mercy has a thousand times triumphed over wrath, and grace over sin;—in a world where the most guilty have been pardoned, the most ungodly sanctified, and the most miserable blessed;—on the same earth, from which Manasseh and David were taken to heaven; where a malefactor, in the agonies of death, was made meet for paradise; where the once blaspheming Paul honoured his Lord more than any one that went before or followed after him, and was at the same time the most afflicted of the sons of men, and the happiest. And by whom were all these wonders wrought? By the very God at whose feet we lie down in despair; by the very Redeemer whose grace, we say, cannot purify us, whose Spirit cannot comfort, and whose blood cannot save us.

The source of this folly is but too plain. We throw a veil over the glory of Jehovah; we make our thoughts his thoughts, and our ways his ways; we strip him of the strength of heaven, and clothe him in the weakness of earth. Nay, it is not always the great God, the only living and true God, whom we set before us. It is often a being of our own creation. We form a god for ourselves. And he is like ourselves, poor in his greatness, and mean in his power, and narrow in his mercy. We put him on an imaginary throne; we call him by the name of the Lord; we then ascribe to him the glorious promises of the gospel; and what must necessarily follow? We feel at once that he is not equal to the performance of them, and we disbelieve and reject them. Abraham "was strong in faith." If we ask why, the apostle tells us; "Being fully persuaded that what God had promised, he was able also to perform." Our faith is weak, because we conceive God to be weak. We imagine him like the idols of men, without an ear to hear or a hand to save.

To these two causes then the unbelief recorded in this history must be traced.

III. Let us go on to consider *the punishment* by which it was followed. This was prompt and awful.

We have before us a promise and a threatening. Not a man in Samaria could tell how either could be fulfilled. But the great God is never at a loss for means to accomplish his designs, whether they be designs of mercy or of

wrath. The Syrians themselves shall furnish to Israel the abundance he has promised. “In the twilight,” early the ensuing night, so early that the Lord seems impatient to vindicate the honour of his insulted servant, a noise in the air, as of horsemen and chariots, is heard in the camp of Benhadad. His troops conclude that an army is coming to the rescue of Samaria. “Lo,” said they, “the king of Israel hath hired against us the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us.” Struck with a sudden panic, they fled, leaving behind them in their tents all their treasures and provisions. Their flight was soon discovered by four lepers. These carried the joyful tidings to the city, and in a few short hours, the event which seemed impossible, is come to pass; the greatest plenty succeeds to the greatest want. “A measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.”

And now where is this unbelieving chief? The unlooked for abundance is come, and the predicted judgment shall follow it. As might have been expected, the news brought by the lepers, occasioned a rush to the gate which led from the city to the deserted camp. This lord was appointed to preserve order in it. It followed therefore, that if there were any one person in the city, who was sure to enjoy the newly acquired plenty, he was that man. No provisions could enter the town without passing before his eyes; he was on the very spot where the booty would be sold. But he “never ate thereof.”

And how was this? No disease robbed him of appetite; no message from the king hurried him away from the scene of plenty. There is something more in the prophet’s threatening, than meets the ear. It is a sentence of death. And the very means which seemed certain to defeat, accomplished it. Hunger made the people impetuous; they rushed to the gate where this lord stood; he was thrown down in the struggle, and “the people trod upon him in the gate, and he died.” Twice is his death recorded; twice does the Holy Spirit bid us mark it. And we learn this from it, that the punishment of unbelief is sure, is great, is beyond expectation dreadful. In its nature it is two-fold.

1. *It loses the promised mercy.* Thus, for instance, the young cannot be persuaded that the gospel can make them happy: they consequently lose that happiness which the gospel brings. The void within them still aches. Their whole life is the chasing of a phantom; their joy, a feeding on ashes. They call it pleasure, but we know, and they know, that this is the sum of it all, “vanity and vexation of spirit.”

You tell the afflicted, that God is “a very present help in trouble that in the darkest hour, he can comfort; that in the wildest storm, he can say “Peace,” and there shall be a calm. They believe you not. The consequence is, they are still “afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted.” Their days do they “consume in vanity, and their years in trouble.”

And turn to the real Christian. Ask him why it is that his harp is on the willows; why all his hopes are clouded and his joys departed. Ask him why

his corruptions triumph, and his graces languish. Ask him why losses fever, and the lightest afflictions depress, and a breath troubles him. The man once trod, like Peter, on the billows; ask him why he now begins to sink on the quiet waters. One reply meets all these questions —he has lost sight for a time of the divine promises. Unbelief has paralyzed his soul; he cannot lay hold of a single blessing.

2. But this loss is not all which this sin has to bear; *it brings down a positive punishment.*

This will be greater or less according to the nature of our unbelief, the truth which it rejects, and the indulgence we give it. It may be the occasional and bewailed infirmity of a Christian heart. In this case, its punishment will be bitter, but not fatal. It may be the cherished sin of an evil heart; it may fasten on “the glorious gospel of the blessed God,” and refuse to give credit to the testimony which God has given of his Son. It is then ruinous; its consequences are tremendous and eternal. “He that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”

And not only does the unbeliever perish, he perishes, under the gospel, on account of his unbelief. As our salvation is ascribed to faith, rather than to any other grace; so our ruin is ascribed to unbelief, rather than to any other sin. “He that believeth not is condemned already;”—and why? “because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Look at Israel in the wilderness. They murmured; they rebelled; they bowed down to idols; they fell into the most abominable iniquities. But why were they excluded from the promised land? The Holy Spirit passes over all their other crimes, and finds the cause of their destruction in their unbelief alone; “To whom sware he, that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”

But we must look into another world, if we would see the divine displeasure against this sin in its true light. The transactions of the great day of judgment will make it plain.

You think perhaps, brethren, that the punishment of this Samaritan lord was severe; but, compared with the vengeance still in reserve for the unbelieving, it was nothing; nothing when compared with the execution of this sentence, “He that believeth not, shall be damned.” And yet there is severity enough in the fate of this man, to make some of us tremble. For disbelieving one promise, for one scoffing speech, he lost his life. Some of you perhaps go much farther than this. You disbelieve every promise and every threatening; you have been scoffing at the gospel of God, and the servants of God, all your life long. What then will be your latter end? If you die as you have lived, it will be this—in the great day of the Lord, you will hear the invitation that calls the blessed of the Father to his kingdom, but you will be bidden to depart accursed. You will “see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of God,” but you yourselves will be thrust out. “Write,” said he who sat

on the throne, to his apostle John, “for these words are true and faithful—the fearful and unbelieving shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.”

The first truth then which we learn from this history, is *the guilt of unbelief*. There must be something inconceivably criminal in that which forfeits so much good, and gives birth to so much misery. We may judge of its nature by its effects. And yet what a trifle do we esteem it! We hear in our own houses of theft, or adultery, or murder. We shrink at the sound of these crimes, and we ought to shrink. We then come to this house of God. The most gracious promises that ever came from the throne of heaven, are brought before us—without a pang or a sigh we discredit them. And yet the contrite adulterer and murderer have been pardoned; the repentant thief has been forgiven. David is in heaven, and the converted malefactor went from his cross to paradise. But when was the impenitent unbeliever saved? Never.

And why all this peculiar displeasure against a sin in appearance so light? It dishonours God more than any other sin. Faith, we are told, “gives glory to God.” Unbelief robs him of his glory. It “makes him a liar.” It slighted his goodness, it asperses his wisdom, it impeaches his sovereignty, it denies his power. There is not one of his perfections at which it does not strike. And then it is the parent of every other sin. It keeps alive all our corruptions; it strengthens and covers them.

We are taught also here *the misery of unbelievers*. They are living now in a world of mercy. They hear too of greater mercies than any which the world affords; of mercies, such as angels in their innocence never received or perhaps thought of. But what is written on them all? “Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.” Is it not so, brethren? True, the sun does shine on you; you breathe the air of God, and take, with others, the common bounties of his providence; but as for spiritual mercies, the mercies which quiet, and fill, and transform the soul—the love of the Father, communion with Christ, the joy of the Holy Ghost—mercies worthy of an immortal spirit to receive, and worthy of an everlasting God to give—you know nothing of them. You hear of them all, but you have never yet tasted the blessedness of one of them. And what has kept them from you? Unbelief. They have all been offered to your acceptance, but you have either doubted their existence, or questioned the sincerity of the offer.

One thing more then is plain—*the necessity of watching against this guilty and miserable thing*.

The sin of which you have been hearing, is not the crime of a century or an age; it is the sin of every hour. In the unsanctified heart, it is always reigning. It characterizes it. It stamps it with this name of reproach, “an evil heart.” It is mixed up with every movement of the soul, and every action of the life.

In the renewed mind, it has been dethroned, but it is yet there. Subtle, long lived, clinging, it is that of which the sinner is last convinced, and which the Christian last conquers. Hear the penitent transgressor speak of his iniquities. He confesses with tears almost every other sin that fallen man can commit: of the greatest of all, of unbelief, he says not a word.

How jealous then ought we to be of ourselves! How suspicious of our unbelieving hearts! Look within. Is no secret distrust of God harboured there? no low thoughts of his mercy, no hard thoughts of his justice, no degrading thoughts of his power? Is the promise, is the oath of Jehovah, always able to keep our minds quiet in danger, and calm, though sorrowful, under a sense of guilt? We can trust one another. There are some of our fellow-worms, on whose veracity we could almost stake our life. Do we always as simply and fully trust the God who cannot lie, the Saviour who bled for us, and the Spirit who comforts us? We are verily guilty.

Ought this thing so to be? Ought it not rather to cover us with humiliation and shame? It grieves our best and dearest Friend more than any other wound we ever gave him; he complains of it more. It made him weary when on earth, of the disciples whom he had chosen. He complained not of their worldly-mindedness or their pride; he bore without a murmur their base desertion of him; but their unbelief caused him to wish himself far away from them. “O faithless generation,” said he of those very men whom he loved as he loved his own soul, “how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?” Nay, this was one of the most bitter ingredients in his cup of woe—“he came unto his own, and his own received him not;” he offered salvation to the perishing, and they refused it.

This is unbelief, brethren. It robs us; it dishonours God; it wastes mercy; it excites wrath; it rivets fast on us the woes of earth; it fills hell; it wounds him who shed his heart’s blood to heal us; it grieves the only Comforter of a wretched world. Shall we love it? Shall we hold it fast? No. How then shall we act? Look at the father who came to Jesus for help for his troubled son. He heard the Saviour’s touching lamentation over the unbelief of his disciples. He heard the words addressed to himself, “If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.” And then how did he act? “Straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”